DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 165 073 CG 013 171

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TITLE The Advocacy or Avoidance of Only Children.
PUB DATE [76]
NOTE 6p.; Best copy available

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Birth Order; *Child Development; Children; *Family Planning; *Family Relationship; Intellectual Development; Intelligence Factors; Literature Reviews; Policy Formation; *Siblings

ABSTRACT

A brief review of the psychological literature on the characteristics of only children is presented in order to determine if the one-child family should be avoided or advocated. The relevant literature is found to be limited in quantity and conceptualization of the only child. Previous literature is divided into three types of study: those with conflicting results; those reporting no differences between only children and others; and those coinciding with the negative stereotype of the only child, especially as regards to IQ score and sex-role identification. It is concluded that the evidence currently cannot support either the advocacy or the avoidance of one-child families. (Author)

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The Advocacy or Avoidance of Only Children

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Concern about limited resources and overpopulation has led policy makers to seek viable means of reducing population growth in the U.S. and elesewhere. One of many possibilities is to encourage more parents to stop at one child. Theoretically, the one child family has much to recommend it. Financially, given comparable incomes, one child families would enjoy a higher standard of living than two or more child families. Personally, the one child family allows people to experience parenthood--something that remaining childless cannot provide--while freeing up parent's time to do other things, such as pursue careers.

Yet, despite these obvious advantages, having just one child is widely considered to be undesirable. Over 80% of Americans surveyed in 1972 reported that they thought being an only child is a disadvantage (Blake, 1974). When undergraduates were asked to describe the typical ~~only~~ child, a predominantly negative image emerged. Only children were portrayed as: "generally maladjusted, self-centered and self-willed, attention-seeking and dependent on others, temperamental and anxious, generally unhappy and unlikeable, and yet somewhat more autonomous than a child with two siblings" (Thompson, 1974). It appears from this evidence that Americans assume that a critical factor in proper social development is the presence of siblings within the family. If this assumption is correct, a policy promoting the one-child family would lead to an increase in selfish, maladjusted, and lonely children. Since such an outcome is undesirable, it is worthwhile to empirically assess popular assumptions about the essentialness of siblings before pursuing a policy about only children.

A serious study of the literature yields little support for the assumptions regarding the necessity of siblings. Note, however, that little research has been conducted about only children and this makes really firm conclusions about only children unjustifiable at present. Research results relevant to only children can be classified into three types: those with conflicting results, those finding no differences between only children and those with results consistent with popular stereotypes about only children.

The conflicting results about only children can be found in studies of birth order. Here only children are frequently lumped together with first borns. Let me share with you a brief survey of the literature. For example, in 1976, Miller and Maruyama reported that only and first borns received lower ratings on peer seating choices than other children--a finding they related to peer popularity. However, in 1963, Sells and Roff reported that only and first borns received higher liking ratings from their peers than did other borns. As reviewers of the birth order literature have noted, these conflicting results are probably due to pecularities of the sample from which the subjects were drawn--that is, chance variation, self-selection, or generational shifts in frequency of certain family sizes and birth orders.

Besides conflicting results, much of the research which has directly focused on only children and their social adjustment has reported finding no differences between them and first or other borns. For example, in 1932, Dyer compared the scores of only and other borns on the Bell Adjustment Inventory and found that for the majority of scales, only children were indistinguishable from others. On the few scales where only children differed, they scored higher than the others. I might add that one needn't go back as far as 1932 to find research reporting no differences between only children and others.

The third type of research results, those involving negative findings about only children, are more critical to determining whether the one-child family should be promoted. To date, many of these so-called negative findings come from questionable interpretations of research results. I will present two important examples: one about masculinity-femininity and the other, about intelligence.

In a book entitled The Sibling, (1970) Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg wrote:

> "There are other data to show that the only boy is more feminine than other males, and the only girls more masculine; moreover, that the deviation in these opposite-sex directions leaves them with a greater tendency toward sex deviations consonant with these tendencies" (p. 153).

Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1970) cited four references in support of this statement (Gundlach & Riess, 1967; Heilbrun & Fromme, 1965; Hooker, 1931; Rosenberg & Sutton-Smith, 1964). An examination of these studies, however, indicates that they provide little or no support for the Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg statement. In three of the four studies cited, no measure of sexual deviancy was included in the research. These three studies contained various measures of conformity to American sex role norms. Hooker's (131) research concerned teacher ratings of the classroom behavior of elementary school students. Among other findings, Hooker reported that teachers rated only children as more likely to "show signs of being sissies or tomboys" (p. 126). In the Rosenberg and Sutton-Smith (1965) study, only the only boys demonstrated an unusual sex role pattern. These boys (N=12) scored high on both masculinity and femininity scales. Furthermore, in the Heilbrun and Fromme (1965) study, the masculinity/femininity scores of only children did not differ significantly from those of children with siblings. Thus, the evidence cited by Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg does not give much support to the conclusion that only children are more likely than others to be more cross sex typed measures of masculinity and femininity.

The fourth reference cited by Rosenberg and Sutton-Smith does, in fact, deal with the relative frequency of birth orders in a sample of lesbians and nonlesbians. However, this study did not find that only children were more likely than others to be found among the lesbian sample. Instead, Gundlach and Riess (1967) reported that a disportionate number of only children, and first borns of a two child family, and later borns from large families were found among the lesbian sample, although they had no explanation for this finding. It was especially perplexing

to them because just the reverse had been found about the frequency of only children among male homosexuals (Bieber et al., 1962). A likely explanation for the Gundlach and Riess results lies in errors associated with the sample, rather than something intrinsic to only children. This sampling error could be brought about by the self-select nature of the lesbian sample and the questionable selection procedure undertaken in obtaining the nonlesbian sample.

The second example concerns intelligence. Here, we have a legitimate, negative finding about only children. Several large scale investigations of IQ have found that IQ is inversely related to family size. Given this, one would expect only children to have the highest IQ of all. This is not the case. Only children consistently score lower than children from two child families and at a level comparable to first borns from three to five child families. Why? Zajonc and Markus (1975) explained this finding in terms of only children lacking siblings. They argued that because only children lack younger siblings to tutor, they lose their advantage in IQ. Zajonc and Markus incorporated this explanation into their model of intellectual development despite the fact that there is no evidence that tutoring someone younger results in an IQ gain for the tutor. But Zajonc and Markus had two justifications for promoting sibling tutoring as an explanation. First, last borns like only children, also deviated negatively from their expected position. Since only and last borns share the common fate of not having a younger sibling, Zajonc and Markus thought that this sibling lack must be the cause of the lowered IQ. Therefore, equations representing only and last borns contained a zero, while equations representing all other birth orders and family sizes contained a one. Second, because the correlation between data simulated by these equations and aggregate data was high (.97), Zajonc and Markus felt that this supported the sibling tutoring explanation.

While there is no question that only children score lower than expected on IQ tests, there is reason to question the explanation offered by Zajonc and Markus. I started looking for alternate explanations--and it didn't take me long to find one. Only children are more likely than children from 2-4 child families to come from single parent homes and there is evidence that children from single parent homes have lower IQs than children from two parent homes. Using equations representing the confluence model, I (Falbo, in press) found that the greater incidence of father absence among one child families to accounts for 25% of the difference between where only children should score and where they actually do.

In conclusion, I think that many reports of negative characteristics of only children represent questionable interpretation of research results. In the case of masculinity-femininity, I think only children will, in the last analysis, be found to score in the fairly ordinary range. The explanation for why only children do not score as high on IQ tests as their family size would indicate remains a matter for speculation. More data is needed about the parental characteristics of only children and the effects of sibling tutoring before we can with any certainty say that only children score lower than they should because they lack siblings.

But how does this BRIEF survey answer the question: should the one child family be encouraged? Clearly, a cautious interpretation of the available research would be that it's not clear whether the one child family should be advocated or avoided. Certainly, more, good research focusing on only children should be conducted. However, between the time we know more and now, it appears that the generally negative view of the social adjustment of only children is not supported by the literature.

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